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Source: *The Concord Saunterer*, New Series, Vol. 21 (2013), pp. 1-35

Published by: The Thoreau Society, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24643589>

Accessed: 30-04-2018 14:25 UTC

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*"Justice in the Land": Ecological Protest in Henry David  
Thoreau's Antislavery Essays*

James Finley

On January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1856, Henry David Thoreau notes in his Journal how he "measured again the great elm in front of Charles Davis's on the Boston Road" (VIII: 116).<sup>1</sup> The Davises were planning to cut down the elm, as Mrs. Davis, having heard the tree "creak in the storm," worried about the solidity of its trunk and the risk its limbs posed to their house (VIII: 127). Thoreau suspects that the tree would have been approximately fifty years old "when the British marched into town" and that it could live an additional fifty years were Mrs. Davis not anxious to cut it down. This elm had apparently grown quite rapidly, resulting in some clefts in its trunk during its first fifty years, but apparently the "tree had afterward united and overgrown them" (VIII: 126).

Read metonymically, this elm might represent a nation that was itself riven with clefts and divisions during the era of Revolution but which overgrew them and united only to be threatened by a Davis, in this case Jefferson Davis.<sup>2</sup> This admittedly tenuous allusion to slavery becomes more explicit on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, when Thoreau argues that the elm was "a native American...in a true and worthy sense" and should have been a representative in the Massachusetts legislature (VIII: 131). Thoreau here references, and subtly attacks, the Native American Party, or the Know-Nothings, whose opposition to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act provided the nativist movement with a veneer of antislavery (Wilentz 683). More locally,

For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, I would like to thank Brigitte Bailey, Katherine Gillen, Erin Hendel, Cathryn Merla-Watson, Lance Newman, Karen Rosenthal, Siobhan Senier, David Watters, and the dissertation writing group at the University of New Hampshire. For help with sources, I thank Jeffrey S. Cramer at the Thoreau Institute. The research and writing of this article was supported in part by fellowships from the Thoreau Society and the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.

*The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, N.S. Vol. 21, 2013

## 2 *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*

Massachusetts Know-Nothings had aligned with antislavery Free Soilers for a landslide victory in the 1854 election. By early 1856, however, the coalition was fracturing over slavery (McPherson 138-9; Wilentz 693-5).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the anti-immigrant and anti-democratic Know-Nothings, the elm is portrayed as a “true and worthy” political agent symbolizing liberty.

Thoreau makes the connection to antislavery politics even more explicit on January 24<sup>th</sup> when he praises American elms as

free-soilers in their own broad sense. They send their roots north and south and east and west into many a conservative’s Kansas and Carolina, who does not suspect such underground railroads,—they improve the subsoil he has never disturbed,—and many times the length, if the support of their principles require it. They battle with the tempests of a century. (VIII: 139-40)

Thoreau here references the antislavery Free Soil movement, a third-party coalition predicated on keeping the rural territories in the West free of slavery. Free Soil ideology figured slavery as an environmentally unsustainable system that would have to grow into new territory in order to survive. Free Soil literature thus typically constructs an environmental dichotomy, one that juxtaposes the beauty and productivity of Northern landscapes, despite their poor soil, with the landscapes of the South, dilapidated and degraded despite their superior natural resources. Slavery is often rendered in Free Soil literature as blight or pollution, threatening to expand beyond its limits and posing an environmental threat to the entire United States. These arboreal free soilers—which Lance Newman has called the “abolitionist elms of Concord”—construct radical networks of antislavery activism, rooting into Southern territory so as to undermine slaveholding hegemony (*Our Common Dwelling* 183). Whereas slavery degrades and blights the land, this abolitionist work improves the soil. They battle the “tempests” caused by pro-slavery fire-eaters. Thoreau’s allusion to Free Soil on January 24<sup>th</sup> brings into relief a more subtle reference to Free Soil concerns in the entry from January 22<sup>nd</sup> wherein he closely examines the “decayed part of the butt end” of the fallen elm, noting “a geographical look” to the splotches of rot (VIII: 130). This dual focus on decay and geography echoes the explicitly environmental aspects of Free Soil ideology.

Although Thoreau, unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson and Franklin Sanborn, did not actively support the Free Soil movement, he here re-articulates and reimagines the environmental emphasis of Free Soil discourse.

For certain abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s, slavery represented an environmental crisis, as plantation agriculture threatened the presumed pristine nature of “free soil” and as the white-supremacist ideology of the slave power sought to naturalize racial categories, dividing humans into separate species and violently forcing people of African descent into positions deemed closer to nature. The extensive and intensive cultivation of tobacco, rice, and cotton, agrarian-minded abolitionists argued, degraded farmland as the economics of slaveholding encouraged the exploitation of lands through extraction-heavy agricultural practices. Many antislavery texts describing the landscapes of the South depict formerly fertile and beautiful spaces blighted and wrecked by plantation agriculture. Charles Ball’s slave narrative, *Slavery in the United States*, for instance, traces the effects of monocultural reliance on cash-crops and the environmental consequences of extractionist ideology. Ball examines how the slave economy, predicated upon violently-compelled labor, egregiously exploits the land, transforming rich, fertile, and productive landscapes into exhausted, sterile, and blighted spaces. His narrative provides specific examples of dilapidated and degraded landscapes across the South, linking slaveholding’s violence against humans with its violence against the land, while also suggesting that land used more responsibly—cultivated by free labor, planted with crops for sustaining a family rather than commodities for the market—could have been spared this sort of widespread environmental destruction. Similarly, Erastus Culver explained to the 1848 Free Soil Convention that when traveling in the South, one would inevitably see the effects of slavery: worn-out soil, dilapidated structures, and a feeling of general desolation (Dyer 11). The contrast between Southern and Northern landscapes was central to John Palfrey’s “Address to the Society of Middlesex Husbandmen and Manufacturers,” which he delivered in Concord on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1846.<sup>4</sup> Palfrey contrasts “nature’s Edens” in the South with Northern spaces cultivated by free farmers (8). For a more loco-descriptive comparison, he juxtaposes southern Pennsylvania and northern Virginia, where the major distinction between the two areas has to do with labor. According to Palfrey,

The comparison therefore illustrates remarkably well the different results, as to agricultural industry, of the free institutions on one side of the line, and the domestic institution on the other. On the one side, the exhausted soil, the great wastes and barrens, the slovenly grain and tobacco fields,

whereas north of the state line one sees a “smiling valley, [with] the heavily nodding heads of the golden harvest” (11). Although these and other examples vary considerably along idealist and materialist registers, they all demonstrate a widespread sense in the period that plantation agriculture reshaped topography with unforeseen ecological consequences. In the words of historian Walter Johnson, the extraction-based production of the slave economy, and cotton monoculture more specifically, “stripped the land of vegetation, leached out its fertility, and rendered one of the richest agricultural regions of the earth dependent on upriver trade for food” (8).

What Rebecca Solnit has identified as the “Thoreau problem,” the compartmentalizing of the natural writings and the political writings, has been addressed in depth by ecocritics within the last decade (972). In particular, those whose scholarship is shaped by environmental justice concerns have argued that Thoreau becomes increasingly effective over his career at linking environmental attention with social protest, combining “protoenvironmentalist attitudes with radical ideas about social reform” (Newman, “Environmentalism Thought” 172). For the most part, this sort of scholarship has examined the role of social protest within Thoreau’s late career nature writings.<sup>5</sup> One especially compelling example is Elise Lemire’s groundbreaking study *Black Walden*, which situates Thoreau’s removal to Walden Pond within the “complicated human history” of Walden Woods (1). Lemire details the community of former slaves who squatted in Walden Woods and traces the echoes of this community in *Walden*, noting the irony that a space now celebrated as “the place where [Thoreau] sought to extricate himself from the politics of slavery” was itself shaped by slavery and its afterlives (6). At the same time, however, Lemire argues that Thoreau suggests in “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” that the “wild” sections outside of Concord

are not solely products of nature. They are the result of a highly stratified social order in which the

highest echelon was comprised of Concord's wealthiest residents, more than half of whom were slaveholders, and the bottom echelon of slaves who were shunted by their former owners onto Concord's margins and left there to make a life for themselves as best they could. To put it more concisely, the history of slavery and its aftermath reveals that at least some of our nation's cherished green spaces began as black spaces, with Walden Woods a particularly striking case in point. (11-2)

In order to further develop such ideas, my essay departs from existing scholarship by addressing the ecological valences within Thoreau's political writings, arguing specifically that his antislavery essays, from the beginning of his abolitionist commitment, reflect the belief that slavery is an environmental problem best addressed through an ecologically inflected protest.<sup>6</sup>

In addressing humans' relation to the land, the material effects of social production, and the naturalization of ideology, Thoreau engages with ecological antislavery concerns similar to those noted above. More expansively, Thoreau reveals how thoroughly Northerners and Northern environments are embedded in slavery's networks, suggesting that slavery is not simply a condition specific to the South but rather an environmental threat to the entire nation. He argues that the slave system pollutes everything, including agricultural land, wilderness, labor conditions, politics, and interpersonal relationships. In making such arguments, Thoreau seeks to impress upon Northern audiences the particular ways in which slavery has put them, their livelihoods, and their society at risk.

### Ecological Antislavery Writing in "Herald of Freedom"

One figure who consistently wrote about slavery as unnatural and ecologically destructive was Nathaniel Rogers, editor of the Concord, New Hampshire, *Herald of Freedom* and the subject of Thoreau's first antislavery publication.<sup>7</sup> Thoreau's essay "Herald of Freedom" provides a brief review of the *Herald*, containing six excerpts interspersed within Thoreau's analysis of the style and content of Rogers' writing. The essay was first published in the April 1844 issue of *The Dial* and was subsequently reprinted in the *Herald of Freedom*

on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1844. A revised version of “Herald” appeared in the posthumous *Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. This attraction on Thoreau’s part to the writings of Rogers suggests that Rogers’ interest in uniting environmental and social protest shaped Thoreau’s antislavery thinking from the beginning of his commitment to abolition.

In the opening of the essay, Thoreau introduces Rogers as a prophet who has come out of the White Mountains to spread a rural antislavery message. Here and throughout “Herald of Freedom,” Thoreau focuses on Rogers’ environment, positioning him as the ideal abolitionist because he is rooted in rural space. In explaining his attraction to the New Hampshire abolitionist, Thoreau writes of Rogers: “unlike most reformers, his feet are still where they should be, on the turf,” as he “looks out from a serener natural life into the turbid arena of politics” (RP 50).<sup>8</sup> Thoreau does not simply reiterate his frequently articulated sentiment that the majority of reformers focus on quotidian concerns and do not recognize that meaningful social reform can only come subsequent to personal or self-reform. Instead, Thoreau figures Rogers as the first “grass-roots” activist, a product of local conditions whose rootedness in rural space provides the solidity and natural purity necessary for engaging in political struggle without being corrupted. Like the free soil elm, whose rootedness helped it overcome its internal divisions, Rogers is depicted as an Antaeus figure—the mythological wrestler who was invincible so long as he remained in contact with his mother Gaia, the earth.<sup>9</sup> (There is clearly some self-identification present here, a point noted by the few critics who have examined “Herald of Freedom.”<sup>10</sup>) This abolitionist Antaeus is best suited to address the problem that Rogers himself had articulated in the *Herald*, namely that slavery has “rooted itself deep” into Northern landscapes and society (“The New Hampshire Patriot”).<sup>11</sup> This multivalent sense of rootedness, in both Thoreau’s and Rogers’ antislavery writings, suggests that slavery is an ecological problem and that abolition must pose an ecological response. In addition, the opening of the essay contains an extended metaphor in which Thoreau links Rogers’ voice with a mountain stream, portraying his antislavery message as invigorating, powerful, and pure. Slavery may be polluting and corrupting Northern landscapes, but there remain spaces—and people—who can resist this crisis.

The remainder of the essay is comprised of excerpts, interspersed with Thoreau’s analysis, in which Rogers critiques

slavery in environmental terms. Using an agricultural metaphor, Thoreau explains that he “cannot do better than enrich our pages with a few extracts from such articles as we have at hand” (RP 51). If his pages are figured as a field and Rogers’ writings as seeds, Thoreau implies that his abolitionism sprouted from his reading of Rogers. In addition, the fact that Thoreau sees Rogers’ message as purifying and naturally healthful suggests that writing can stand as a form of defense against the spreading blight of slavery. The first excerpt, accordingly, contains Rogers’ passionate argument against the “bloody system” that is destroying the land of the United States (RP 51). Rogers had made a similar point in 1837, in his address to the Concord, New Hampshire, Female Antislavery Society, when he posited that “slavery is the crime and curse of the whole land....The tree not only overshadows the North, but its roots run up here and are intertwined among the rocks of the soil of freedom. Here it derives its nutriment and here it must be overthrown” (*An Address* 19). Another excerpt includes a brief jeremiad warning that the “leaden-colored wing of slavery obscures the land” (RP 52). Slavery is portrayed as heavy and suffocating, ruining landscapes and ruining crops. These examples figure slavery as a form of environmental pollution whose effects are not restricted to the South but threaten Northern spaces as well. In seeing slavery as an especially destructive system, Rogers recognizes the environmental consequences of social injustice and thus underscores the importance of mobilizing around environmental degradation. Rogers warns that the slave system, as a sort of environmental pollution, cannot be contained by borders or legal codes, suggesting that while Northern spaces might seem pristinely beautiful and naturally distinct from the topographies of bondage, such distinctions are illusionary and lead to both passivity and a false sense of security. By literally and figuratively disseminating Rogers’ ecological antislavery argument, Thoreau puts his writings to work resisting the ideological and environmental expansion of slaveholding hegemony.

In a move that anticipates his famous calls for the establishment of natural preserves at the end of the “Chesuncook” section of *The Maine Woods* and in “Walking,” Thoreau concludes the 1844 essay with a call to preserve Rogers’ writings in a collection:

We deem such timely, pure, and unpremeditated expressions of a public sentiment, such publicity of genuine indignation and humanity, as abound every



where in this journal, the most generous gifts a man can make, and should be glad to see the scraps from which we have quoted, and the others which we have not seen, collected into a volume. It might, perchance, penetrate into some quarters which the unpopular cause of freedom has not reached.... Long may we hear the voice of this Herald. (D 512)

In calling for the preservation of Rogers' writings, Thoreau deems these antislavery texts to be national treasures with an important environmental mandate. Thoreau claims in "Walking" that "in literature, it is only the wild that attracts us" (207). The wildness of Rogers' antislavery argument, it seems, not only attracts Thoreau but holds the potential to "penetrate into some quarters which the unpopular cause of freedom has not reached," much like the abolitionist elms referred to above. The wild, in other words, represents a central component of Thoreau's abolitionism.

When Thoreau revised "Herald," likely during the writing of *A Week* and subsequent to Rogers' death in 1846, he penned a new coda, which was published in the posthumous *A Yankee in Canada* collection.<sup>12</sup> Thoreau cuts the "We deem" third-person plural opening of the 1844 conclusion, retains only part of the first sentence, and ends with the statement that Rogers' expressions "are the most generous gifts which a man can make" (210). This new ending does not call for an edition of Rogers' writings—most likely because of the publication of *A Collection of the Miscellaneous Writings of Nathaniel Peabody Rogers* in 1847—nor does it express hope for the endurance of the *Herald*, which ceased publication in late 1846. Instead, Thoreau's new conclusion begins with a reference to the journey that he and his brother took up the Merrimack River: "But since our voyage Rogers has died, and now there is no one in New England to express the indignation or contempt which may still be felt at any cant or inhumanity" (RP 56). Thoreau then explains that while Rogers may have

had all the faults, he had more than the usual virtues of the radical. He loved his native soil, her hills and streams....[He] viewed the country with a poet's eye, and some of his letters written back to his editorial substitute contain as true and pleasing pictures of

New England life and scenery as are anywhere to be found. (RP 56-7)

Thoreau here makes explicit what he demonstrated throughout the 1844 essay: first, that Rogers' love of nature and his talent as a nature writer were central to his abolitionism, and second, that he is radical in both a political and an ecological sense. The conclusion of the 1847 essay thus returns to the image that opened the 1844 piece of Rogers as rooted in the earth. Mourning both Rogers and the fact that no writer has filled the gap left by Rogers' death, Thoreau regrets the resulting absence of ecological antislavery argument. As the remainder of this essay will illustrate, Thoreau's more famous antislavery writings can themselves be read as attempts to fill the gap caused by Rogers' death, extending the ecological antislavery critique into the 1850s and thus responding to the increasing environmental crisis of slavery.

### **The Moral Ground: "Resistance to Civil Government"**

In the summer of 1846, Thoreau famously spent a night in the Concord Jail after refusing to pay his poll tax in an attempt to dissolve the "union" between himself and the State. As he explains in "Resistance to Civil Government,"<sup>13</sup> the 1849 essay inspired by his night in jail, he aimed to withdraw his support from an expansionist government complicit with the Southern Slave Power.<sup>14</sup> The essay, which considers the ideological and practical place of justice in politics and contemporary society, generally stands as the *de facto* articulation of Thoreau's political philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Thoreau delivered the speech that ultimately became "Resistance to Civil Government" in early 1848, coterminous with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.-Mexican War and marked the beginning of the 1848 election cycle that witnessed the rise of the Free Soil Party.<sup>16</sup> It is likely that Thoreau revised "Herald" at the same time as he began working on the lecture that ultimately became "Resistance to Civil Government." Linck Johnson thus reads "Resistance" as "itself a kind of oblique tribute to [Rogers] and other radical social critics of the 1840s" ("Nathaniel Peabody Rogers" 222). One can clearly see in Thoreau's famous essay traces of Rogers' come-outerism and his hostility toward organizations, particularly the attack on corrupt institutions and the rendering of jail as a space of freedom within an unfree polity. As David S. Reynolds has argued,

“Thoreau out-Rogered Rogers” in “Resistance” (225). As does Rogers, Thoreau demonstrates his faith in the efficacy of nature uncorrupted by slavery, and it is this appeal to the salutary power of an antislavery nature, combined with Thoreau’s focus on place, that lends “Resistance to Civil Government” an ecological valence.

Throughout “Resistance to Civil Government” Thoreau is preoccupied with questions of place. Broadly, he considers the relation between a government and its territory, demonstrates the geographic effects of unnatural politics, and attempts to find the “true place for a just man” within an unjust state (RP 76). The question for Thoreau is how one is to act—and where one should act—when “his moral ground is taken from under his feet” (RP 77). This topographic emphasis reflects Thoreau’s horror over the territorial expansion of slavery, which he depicts using environmental metaphors, such as the “laws” of the acorn and chestnut, so as to distinguish what is natural from what is not (RP 81). Thoreau recognizes that he is situated in an environment especially vulnerable to corruption. He feels himself implicated in the territorial expansion of slavery, which thereby necessitates his resistance. But whereas Thoreau admits that he could not realistically resist a “natural force” or “change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts,” he clearly believes that he can effectively resist the State (RP 85). Echoing Rogers, Thoreau posits that because a slaveholding state is not natural, it can—and should—be resisted.

Toward the end of “Resistance,” Thoreau details his departure from jail; once his fine has been paid, he quickly finds himself “in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off; and then the State was nowhere to be seen” (RP 84). Thoreau’s removal here is a bit disjunctive, as he abruptly shifts attention from the town and the realm of politics toward what appears to be distinctly natural space, a space that he values, apparently, because it exists beyond the political. It is as though the radical Thoreau transforms instantly and with no warning into the green Thoreau, abandoning his social commitment for what appears to be his more deeply-held interest in nature (Buell 38). At the same time, however, this moment does contain a level of social commitment, as Thoreau emphasizes the communal make up of the “huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct” (RP 84). This party enlists him, and he joins them in their labors, for, as he says in the sentence that follows the interlude about his incarceration, “I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am

being a bad subject” (RP 84). The joining of the huckleberrying party is a neighborly act, a sort of praxis that while not explicitly abolitionist still aligns with the sort of antislavery activism articulated by Rogers.<sup>17</sup> Bringing his neighbors into the hills surrounding Concord—beyond the town’s “peculiar institutions” (RP 82)—represents a form of come-outerism that is both inspired by Rogers and explicitly Thoreauvian.

One of the most ecological moments of “Resistance to Civil Government” occurs at the essay’s conclusion, in which Thoreau not only deploys natural imagery but also interweaves the cycles of natural reproduction with the social production of justice. Here again, Thoreau mentions fruit, but in this case he is more explicit in linking nature and society. Thoreau articulates his hope in the mutually constructed, redemptive power of nature and politics:

I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen. (RP 89-90)

Both forms of fruit, the huckleberries and the figurative fruit of justice, hold value for Thoreau in that they have not been contaminated by slavery and, as such, grow on what he earlier calls “moral ground” (RP 77). This final image calls to mind John Milton’s depiction of the Garden of Eden in Book Four of *Paradise Lost*, in which Eden’s “happy rural seat” contains “goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit,” fruit that “hung amiable” from “compliant boughs” (4.247, 147, 250, 332).<sup>18</sup> While Thoreau recognizes that paradisiacal nature does not exist at present, he remains hopeful that it will come into being, that society can regain this prelapsarian space. Regaining this space can come about through acts of resistance as well as through acts of removal to non-human nature. The ecological focus in “Resistance to Civil Government” thus is both material and idealist, with the huckleberrying party providing a specific place from

which to begin envisioning a new sort of community, while the vision of a fruit-bearing State—like the Free Soil elm—provides an aspiration model from nature.

### **A Moral Earthquake: The Fugitive Slave Law and the 1850s**

The Compromise of 1850 literally reshaped the landscapes of slavery and freedom. Henry Clay's resolutions included a rejection of the Wilmot Proviso, thereby opening up to slavery much of the land conquered during the U.S.-Mexican War. Another of the Compromise's architects, Daniel Webster, refused to propose laws banning slavery in the territories since he believed that topography would bar slavery's extension. As Fergus M. Bordewich wryly suggests, "It was up to nature to stop the westward migration of slavery, not Daniel Webster" (166). The Compromise also secured the presence of slavery in the District of Columbia and strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act. The new Fugitive Slave Act stated that "fugitives from service or labor" may be pursued "under the laws of the State or Territory from which such person owing service or labor may have escaped" (*The Public Statutes* 462-3). The geopolitical distinctions of the federalist system are, to a large extent, voided here, as the laws and protections of one state or territory are subsumed under the laws of another. Along these lines, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 also had environmental resonance, as popular sovereignty threatened the free soil of the West and risked turning the territories into what Free Soiler Salmon Chase envisioned as a "dreary region" (qtd. in Foner, *Free Soil* 94). Such a transformation has ecological consequences, as Thoreau explains in his antislavery writing during the 1850s. Writing in his Journal in April 1851 after the rendition of Thomas Sims, for example, Thoreau equates the passage of the Compromise with a "moral earthquake" (3: 203).

Thoreau thus claims in his 1854 essay "Slavery in Massachusetts" that the Fugitive Slave Act, primarily, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, by extension, have transformed space.<sup>19</sup> He focuses on the Fugitive Slave Act's topographical ramifications, claiming that it has weakened boundaries and extended the pollutive effects of slavery. The 1854 essay repeats his 1851 claim that the passage and enforcement of the law reflected a "moral earthquake" (RP 93). Whereas in "Resistance to Civil Government" Thoreau depicts the "moral ground" taken out from under his feet, in this instance he addresses a far more significant and consequential shift,

one that he equates with geological activity and the reshaping of Northern topography. In other words, the landscapes of the slave system have extended into and threatened Northern space.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the 1850s, as Albert von Frank has shown in *The Trials of Anthony Burns*, many abolitionists shared the “conviction that slavery was wrong—yet it remained, blessedly, a distant wrong....What had yet to be induced was a conviction of the substantial presence of slavery” (148-9). Von Frank makes clear that the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act was “one form of presence” and that the arrests of Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns were “another, more concrete form of presence” (149). In his essay, Thoreau articulates his concern that his neighbors do not grasp the magnitude of this presence as they are preoccupied with “the destiny of Nebraska” and ignore “slavery in Massachusetts” (RP 91). Their concern, he implies, is with the Free Soil struggle over the extension of slavery into the territories. Thoreau seeks to shift their concern to their surrounding environment, believing, as did Rogers, that the majority of Northerners would mobilize around antislavery when they felt that their landscapes and their livelihoods, not just those of distant lands, were threatened. This is why, as Von Frank has argued, “‘Slavery in Massachusetts’ was not to be the response, once more, of a slave to a slave case, but a report issued from free soil about conditions there” (283). The battle over free soil, Thoreau recognizes, is not limited to the territories but is also taking place in Massachusetts. The question of slavery’s expansion is “vexing the land,” making life “worth less” across the entire nation (RP 99, 107). In this instance, Thoreau does not distinguish Massachusetts from the territories, or slave states from free states, because all land in the U.S., as a result of the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, is under threat.

Thoreau figures this threat in explicitly ecological terms as a form of pollution, one that is expansive and impossible to contain within politically inscribed borders. The pollution trope, as discussed above, was central to the ecological antislavery argument of Nathaniel Rogers that Thoreau reiterated in the 1844 “Herald of Freedom.” Ten years later, Thoreau claims this sort of argument as his own. In order to emphasize the pollutive effects of the slave power and to underscore the threats faced by his neighbors, Thoreau equates slavery with decay and death, referring to it as a “foul slime” and “the slime and muck of the earth,” suggesting that the natural productivity and beauty of the land are damaged by the particular practices of the slave system.<sup>21</sup> Such a response shows that his

thinking about slavery and the environment has become more interactive, fixated on shifting borders and expanding degradation. The sort of optimism contained in earlier essays—predicated upon a belief that Northern nature was separate and distinct from Southern spaces—breaks down, and Thoreau demonstrates the wide-ranging ecological consequences of social injustice. In the new materialist framework she outlines in *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo's claim that "attention to the material transit across bodies and environments may render it more difficult to seek refuge within fantasies of transcendence or imperviousness" helps bring into relief the shift in Thoreau's thinking (16). No longer can he treat the Concord woods as somehow distant and protected from the topographies of the slave system. Its pollutive reach, Thoreau believes, is no respecter of boundaries.

Having lost any sense that he and Northern nature were either impervious to or ontologically separate from the peculiar institution and the landscapes of slavery, Thoreau strives to impress this realization upon his audience, demonstrating the extent to which "slavery, or unfreedom, subverts and reverses everything" (Von Frank 284). In order to emphasize how thoroughly everything has changed, Thoreau again draws upon *Paradise Lost*. Unsurprisingly, Thoreau ignores the Edenic environment referred to in "Resistance to Civil Government," focusing instead on Book Nine and its postlapsarian landscapes. First, his reference to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act as a "moral earthquake" echoes the environmental consequences of the Fall. When Eve tastes of the fruit, "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" (9.782-4). After Adam eats, the "Earth trembled from her entrails, as again / In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan" (9.1000-1). Human action, both Milton and Thoreau explain, can effectively shake the earth and wound the environment. Thoreau continues to deploy Miltonic language when he suggests that, like a "venomous reptile," the law's "natural habitat is in the dirt...and has its life only in the dust and mire...and he who walks with freedom...will inevitably tread on it, and so trample it under foot" (RP 97). This passage echoes the portrayal of Satan as cursed to the dust: "Upon thy belly groveling shalt thou go, / And dust shalt eat all the days of thy life" (10.177-8). Thoreau thus suggests that the law is as destructive to the environment as were Satan and the Fall, while also implying that the United States awaits a

redeemer who will trample the law—much as Christ will defeat Satan—and recreate Eden.<sup>22</sup>

Thoreau returns to Milton later in the essay when he notes that he “dwelt before, perhaps, in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only *between* heaven and hell, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell *wholly within* hell” for the North has become “morally covered with volcanic scorïæ and cinders, such as Milton describes in the infernal regions” (RP 106-7). Thoreau no longer feels positioned between the hellish topographies of the slave system and the uncorrupted landscapes alluded to in “Resistance.” Instead, slavery has come to Massachusetts, polluting it and turning it into hell. Thoreau, it seems, judges the Compromise of 1850 to be even worse than the Fall, for the topographical and ecological consequences he addresses are not simply postlapsarian but rather infernal.

Just as Thoreau’s turn toward the huckleberry fields in “Resistance to Civil Government” has attracted criticism from ecocritics, so has Thoreau’s walk in the woods surrounding Concord in “Slavery in Massachusetts.” As Thoreau laments:

I walk toward one of our ponds, but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them; when we are not serene, we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. (RP 108)

It seems as though Thoreau—as he does in the earlier essay—seeks to remove himself into the apolitical environment. This time, however, he is faced with the crushing recognition that he cannot do so. Lawrence Buell has argued that this moment of “retort pastoral” is “suspect,” as Thoreau’s “righteous indignation seems to dissolve into a sulk (37-8). Buell emphasizes Thoreau’s “insouciance,” wherein he seeks to avoid social injustice through immersion in a “simplified green world” (38).<sup>23</sup> In contrast, I have been suggesting that, for Thoreau, the landscapes of the slave state are not ahistorical, pastoral spaces beyond the reach of social processes but rather landscapes ecologically interrelated with, and infernally corrupted by, the slave system.<sup>24</sup> It is not only Thoreau’s walk that has been ruined but also the environment itself. While this passage clearly privileges



the phenomenological as Thoreau focuses on his inner environment to the extent that he seems to ignore actual conditions, when read in light of the remainder of the essay, not to mention the earlier antislavery writings, it is apparent that Thoreau here responds to the material corruption and pollutive effects of slavery.

Despite the pessimism and sense of irreversible catastrophe in "Slavery in Massachusetts," I would like to suggest that Thoreau still retains hope in both the regenerative potential of nature and the efficacy of an ecological antislavery praxis. Immediately following the paragraph in which he mourns his spoiled walk, Thoreau explains:

it chanced the other day that I scented a white water-lily, and a season I had waited for had arrived. It is the emblem of purity. It bursts up so pure and fair to the eye, and so sweet to the scent, as if to show us what purity and sweetness reside in, and can be extracted from, the slime and muck of the earth....If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her integrity and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, too. It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise....So behave that the odor of your actions may enhance the general sweetness of the atmosphere, that when we behold or scent a flower, we may not be reminded how inconsistent your deeds are with it; for all odor is but one form of advertisement of a moral quality, and if fair actions had not been performed, the lily would not smell sweet. The foul slime stands for the sloth and vice of man, the decay of humanity; the fragrant flower that springs from it, for the purity and courage which are immortal.

Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have no real life: they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils. We do not complain that they *live*, but that they do not *get buried*. Let the living bury them; even they are good for manure. (RP 108-9, emphasis Thoreau's)

Here, Thoreau most explicitly demonstrates the ecological and topographical consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act, as the “slime and muck of the earth” represent the fetid, dark, insubstantial, and unproductive landscapes that result from the pollutive contact with slavery. Thoreau, sensitive to the sort of interconnection, interrelations, and dynamism that characterize ecological thinking, sees that interpenetration as reversible, as the lily, both visually and olfactorily, represents purity.<sup>25</sup> The corruption of nature, thus, is superficial. That corruption is also unjust, as nature did not contractually link itself with slavery, having been “partner to no Missouri Compromise.” As Albert Von Frank has shown, the 1820 Missouri Compromise was frequently referred to in reactions to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the trial of Anthony Burns (163-4, 192). Like many of his contemporaries, Thoreau does not simply condemn the Kansas-Nebraska Act for nullifying the Missouri Compromise but instead renders the passage of Kansas-Nebraska as a direct consequence of the 1820 compromise.<sup>26</sup> Thoreau’s outrage, in other words, moves backward, past the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, to the 1820 Compromise, which permitted the expansion of slavery west of the Mississippi below the 36° 30’ parallel.<sup>27</sup> Thoreau thus situates the lily within political and environmental history, tracing the decades-long ramifications of the Missouri Compromise to the landscapes of the mid-1850s. The ecological destruction wrought by slavery’s expansion, in other words, is not specific to the 1850s but rather reflects a long-standing and ongoing environmental crisis.

Thoreau suggests throughout this passage that both the slave system and the environmental degradation that results are unnatural. Denaturalizing slavery serves to delegitimize it and, in turn, situates it within social history so as to claim that present conditions are neither permanent nor irreversible. In line with this conclusion, Thoreau introduces human agency, focusing on the sort of behavior that can reverse environmental decay and repair ecological damage. This suggestion modifies the Transcendental belief that nature can redeem society by focusing instead on how activism can redeem nature.<sup>28</sup> Thoreau then ends with yet another depiction of slavery’s pollutive effect before going on to suggest that the pollution can be cleaned up. In contrast to the lily, which rises above the ground, slavery belongs below the ground, buried not by the sword but by the plow. Throughout this conclusion, Thoreau demonstrates slavery’s unnaturalness and articulates a free labor

response to slavery's corruption of the land. His reaction to the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska Acts is to call for behavior that, unlike slavery and oppression, improves ecosocial conditions. Only actual work to create new relationships between people and the land—not just imagining an ideal state—will bring about a more environmentally and socially just world. Thoreau's portrayal of the white lily, situated within an atmosphere sweetened by human behavior and injustice turned into manure, suggests that the catastrophic “earthquake” of the 1850s could be reversed by antislavery activists working with nature.

### **True as the Voice of Nature: Thoreau and John Brown**

While Thoreau is less than clear in “Slavery in Massachusetts” about precisely what this ecosocial work will entail, later in the decade he celebrates John Brown's antislavery labors as exemplary precisely because of the land-based nature of his work.<sup>29</sup> In addition to a shared desire to resist the territorial expansion of the slave system and their experiences as surveyors, Thoreau and Brown, I will suggest, both demonstrate an ecological sensitivity to slavery's effects on nature. Thoreau was introduced to Brown by Franklin Sanborn, who recounts in his memoirs that “Thoreau, who had his own bone to pick with the civil government, which he had resisted while at Walden, and had gone to prison rather than pay a tax to uphold slavery, was desirous of meeting Brown” (103). Patrick Chura suggests that Thoreau's enthusiasm for Brown was validated by commonalities that likely would have been “revealed through their conversation” (139). Thoreau's attraction to the abolitionism of John Brown, it seems, echoes his interest in Rogers a decade and a half earlier, as both Rogers and Brown sought to mobilize around slavery as an ecological threat.

Similar to his earlier antislavery work, Thoreau's speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” delivered in the weeks after Harpers Ferry and published in 1860, focuses on territory and the expansion of slavery, highlighting Brown's dedication to the Free Soil movement. Thoreau was not interested in simply justifying or defending Brown's notorious attack in Virginia but rather strove to explicate Brown's “character and actions,” as his speech was advertised.<sup>30</sup> This entailed an explicit focus on Kansas and the struggle to resist the extension of slavery. Early in his first essay on Brown, Thoreau explains:

When the troubles in Kansas began, he sent several of his sons thither to strengthen the party of the Free State men, fitting them out with such weapons as he had; telling them that if the troubles should increase, and there should be need of him, he would follow to assist them with his hand and counsel. This, as you all know, he soon after did; and it was through his agency, far more than any other's, that Kansas was made free. (RP 112)

Brown's actions on behalf of the Free Soil movement, Thoreau explains, were like those of a "good seed," whose "good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate" (RP 119). Brown thus effectively planted the seed of liberty in the West, extending the roots of free soil into contested terrain. Because liberty is natural, of "such force and vitality," it emerges from inauspicious conditions, much like the lily in "Slavery in Massachusetts." Providing an ideological and agricultural alternative to the slave system, Brown's project thus synthesizes concern over injustice with attention to land, making him, in Thoreau's eyes, "clear as a cloudless sky, true as the voice of nature is" (RP 137).

As a Free Soiler with a deep understanding of nature and topography, Brown sought to rid Kansas and the nation of the pollution of slavery. In depicting Brown's Free Soil labors, Thoreau underscores the ecological components of Brown's work.<sup>31</sup> As he did with Rogers, Thoreau praises Brown for recognizing the environmental consequences of the slave system. In "A Plea," Thoreau celebrates Brown's writings on soil conditions, implying that his knowledge about land fed his antislavery fervor. Thoreau explains, introducing Brown:

at one time he was engaged in wool-growing, and he went to Europe as an agent about that business. There, as every where, he had his eyes about him, and made many original observations. He said, for instance, that he saw why the soil of England was so rich, and that of Germany (I think it was) so poor,

and he thought of writing to some of the crowned heads about it. It was because in England the peasantry live on the soil which they cultivate, but in Germany they are gathered into villages, at night. It is a pity that he did not make a book of his observations. (RP 112)

Being involved in wool-growing would have enabled Brown to see firsthand how particular forms of agriculture and material production can damage the land.<sup>32</sup> Thoreau privileges Brown's environmental perspicuity, suggesting that he has "eyes about him" which enable a unique sort of analysis as to how social production shapes landscapes. This sort of vision imbues his antislavery prophecy with an ecological ethic. Brown, similar to George Perkins Marsh in *Man and Nature*, translates observations about environmental conditions in Europe into lessons for the United States. But whereas Marsh warned about deforestation, Brown is focused on agriculture's effects on soil. Germany's enclosure of the commons has had environmental consequences, and from this point Thoreau extrapolates that the even more restrictive and oppressive practices in the U.S. will lead to significantly greater dilapidation. Thoreau then, echoing his statement from a decade and a half earlier about Rogers' writings, wishes that Brown's observations were collected and published.

Thoreau links Brown's experience as a surveyor to his antislavery activism. As Patrick Chura has shown, these "surveying tactics were a factor in Thoreau's ardent devotion to Brown" (147). Chura suspects that, in their conversations, Brown confided to Thoreau "how the profession had been significant in the lead-up to the notorious killing raid at Pottawatomie Creek" (140). Brown used his experience and talents as a surveyor for other antislavery purposes, first in North Elba, New York, at Gerrit Smith's community for free blacks and former slaves, and second in Kansas, helping the Ottawas protect their land against proslavery settlers (Chura 135-8). Thoreau explains in "A Plea" that, at a time when few Free Soilers could successfully travel to Kansas, Brown did so as a surveyor, which in turn allowed him to spy on his enemies and hide in swamps that none of the pro-slavery settlers were willing or able to traverse in search of him (RP 115-6). This intimate knowledge of environment and topography, Thoreau suggests at other points in "A Plea," was instrumental to Brown's work in Kansas. Thoreau quotes

a “Western writer” who explains that Brown’s uncanny ability to escape from dangerous situations stems from the fact that he “was concealed under a ‘rural exterior’” (RP 113).

Thoreau also connects Brown ideologically to the Free Soil movement. First, Thoreau explains that Brown “was an old-fashioned man in his respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this Union” (RP 112). In opposition to Garrisonians, who were explicit in their condemnation of the Constitution, Free Soilers defended the Constitution as an antislavery document, which, while it allowed slavery in the Old South, forbid its expansion into the territories. Second, Thoreau notes that Brown was “by descent and birth a New England farmer, a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical as that class is, and tenfold more so” (RP 112-3). This emphasis on class and yeoman virtue directly echoes the rhetoric of Free Soil and the ideology of antislavery Republicanism. Brown needed “no abolition lecturer” to convert him, Thoreau explains; his dedication to economic liberty both ran in his blood and stemmed from his upbringing on the land. Just as Rogers’ descent from Protestant martyrs and love for his native White Mountains animated his antislavery passion, so too did Brown’s yeoman ancestry and upbringing in the free soil of New England nurture his dedication to abolition.

Throughout his antislavery writings, from his review of Rogers to his celebrations of John Brown, Thoreau focuses on nature and the environment, treating slavery as an ecological problem with wide-ranging consequences for both the land and humans’ relations to the land. I have suggested that Thoreau’s antislavery essays were not merely ancillary to his life-long fascination with the natural world, for the themes that he develops in his famous nature writings appear throughout his antislavery essays. David Robinson has stated that “Thoreau worked hard to maintain a cohesive tie between his commitment to the study of nature and his moral obligation as an opponent of slavery” (6). I do not see signs that this cohesion was as hard to maintain as Robinson believes, in part because of the sensitivity with which Thoreau viewed humans’ place within the natural world. At the same time, however, Thoreau’s interest in Nathaniel Rogers and the lasting influence that Rogers’ ecological antislavery arguments had on Thoreau’s thinking suggest that, from the start of his abolitionist career, Thoreau had an exemplary model of how to unite the opposition to slavery with the study of nature, an ethic that he sought to rearticulate in “Resistance

to Civil Government” and “Slavery and Massachusetts” and a commitment that he recognized in John Brown.

## NOTES

1. Volumes in the 1906 edition of the Journal will be cited using Roman numerals, while references to the Princeton Edition will be cited with Arabic numerals.
2. By this point, Davis had been a prominent general in the U.S.-Mexican War and had served as Secretary of War under Franklin Pierce, during which time he had helped spearhead the Kansas-Nebraska Act and had sent troops to Boston to assist with the rendition of Anthony Burns.
3. As Eric Foner has shown, radical abolitionists opposed Know-Nothingism as “an unfortunate aberration which diverted attention from the anti-slavery cause and divided its adherents” (*Free Soil* 233).
4. John Gorham Palfrey, a Whig politician turned Free Soiler from Cambridge, who was active during the mid-1840s in the Massachusetts anti-Texas annexation movement, served as Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth from 1844 until he was appointed to the Agriculture Committee following the election of 1848 (Gatell 149). Palfrey subsequently ran for Congress on the Free Soil ticket in 1851, supported by Ralph Waldo Emerson on “his first stump campaign” (Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero* 22).
5. See especially Myers 49-86, Newman, *Our Common Dwelling* 147-84, and Walls, *Seeing New Worlds* 212-23. For other studies that see social protest in the nature writing see Taylor, Jane Bennett, and Robinson.
6. My use of ecology as a heuristic draws upon Timothy Morton’s work on ecological thinking and in particular his claim that ecology does not refer simply to the science of ecology: “Ecological thinking...includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence” (*The Ecological Thought* 4). Morton notes that whereas environmental writing focuses on the “out-there” and the “not-me,” ecological writing “keeps insisting that we are ‘embedded’ in nature” (*Ecology without Nature* 4). Ecological thinking, Morton explains, is “a practice and a

process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral” (*The Ecological Thought* 7). An ecological sort of protest in this case is predicated upon a sense of material interconnection. This approach thus avoids the sort of holistic and utopian thinking that characterize Romantic ecology and Deep Ecology, traditions which Dana Phillips incisively critiques as overly relativistic and in fact anti-scientific (76).

My thinking about ecological writing as social protest is also indebted to Laura Dassow Walls’ work on Alexander von Humboldt. As Walls explains in *The Passage to Cosmos*, Humboldt recognized that “environmental destruction was also socially devastating: natural ecology entails social ecology. In Humboldt the two were forged together, humans and nature forming two sides of the same coin,” a connection that Walls locates in Thoreau’s writings as well (10).

7. *Herald of Freedom* was the official newspaper of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society. Rogers took over editorial duties in 1838 after years of contributing from his hometown in Plymouth. Under Rogers’ guidance, the *Herald* became a nationally prominent abolitionist paper, second only to the *Liberator* (Cox 54). It is likely that Rogers was familiar with Ball’s narrative, as it was excerpted in the August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1836 edition of the *Herald*.
8. All references to *Reform Papers* hereafter will be cited RP, unless noted otherwise.
9. This image of rootedness appears a year later in Thoreau’s *Journal*, as he notes on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1845 that his beans at Walden “attach me to the earth—and so I get new strength and health like Antaeus” (2: 158). Thoreau repeats this sentence almost verbatim in *Walden*, emphasizing strength and attachment but omitting health in the published version (155).
10. Wendell Glick, for instance, looks to “*Herald of Freedom*” for evidence of Thoreau’s early thoughts about abolition, particularly as the *Journal* lacks entries from this period (“Thoreau and the ‘Herald of Freedom’” 193). Glick notes that no other figure, aside from Wendell Phillips and John Brown, received such unqualified praise from Thoreau, leading Glick to suppose that Thoreau, at least in 1844, fully accepted Rogers’ antislavery approach (195). Walter Harding explains that “to Thoreau’s mind Rogers was applying principles thoroughly in keeping with



Transcendentalism to the major social problem of the day, slavery, and thus praised his efforts and his courage" (119-20). Thoreau was especially attracted, Harding notes, to Rogers' emphasis on self-reform and his related antipathy to the institutionalization of abolition (201-2). Linck Johnson suggests that Thoreau admired Rogers' literary style, particularly his nature writing, and was less attracted to Rogers the reformer ("Native" 217). Johnson claims "what distinguished Rogers from other reformers was his style, which Thoreau associated with the rivers and mountains of New Hampshire" (*Thoreau's Complex Weave* 93). Ultimately, Johnson believes that Rogers' influence on Thoreau was temporary ("Native" 220). Len Gougeon claims that Thoreau admired Rogers for addressing all kinds of wrong, rather than focusing "myopically on one particular evil" ("Thoreau" 199). The only other analysis of Rogers' influence on Thoreau comes from Sandra Petrulionis, who, in her study of antislavery activity in Concord, Massachusetts, claims that Thoreau's 1844 essay "exhibits several of what would become Thoreau's political trademarks—the scathing wit, the moral umbrage, the outraged denunciations, the liberal exclamation marks and underlinings are all on display in this first antislavery piece." Petrulionis suggests that "Thoreau admired Rogers' affinity for the New England wilderness and valued the editor's caustic tone" (*To Set this World Right* 39).

11. Rogers' suggestion here anticipates Emerson's image in "Ode, Inscribed to W.H. Channing" that among the "freedom-loving mountaineer[s]" of New Hampshire are to be found the "jackals of the Negro holder" (76-7). Len Gougeon explains that Emerson wrote this poem in 1846, commemorating the funeral of Charles Turner Torrey, an abolitionist who died in the Spring of 1846 in a Maryland prison after assisting fugitives (*Virtue's Hero* 114).
12. For more on how "Herald" figured in the composition of *A Week*, see Johnson, "Native to New England."
13. Because I wish to situate this essay within the broad trajectory of Thoreau's treatment of abolition, and the late 1840s more specifically, I retain Thoreau's original title, although I am convinced by arguments articulated by James Dawson, Thomas Woodson, and Fritz Oehlschlaeger that the revised title, "Civil Disobedience," stems from Thoreau rather than Sophia Thoreau or William Ellery Channing, editors of the posthumous

collection *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. Linck Johnson has shown how the essay “sank into obscurity” after its publication, despite the fact that the views articulated by Thoreau were becoming increasingly accepted among abolitionists (“The Life and Legacy” 631).

14. Randall Conrad argues that it was the First of August antislavery celebration, held in 1846 at Walden Pond, that inspired Thoreau to turn the week-old events of his incarceration into an antislavery essay (182-3). Linck Johnson sees further inspiration in Thoreau’s reading the 1847 collection or Nathaniel Rogers’ editorials addressed above (*Thoreau’s Complex Weave* 117). For examinations of the theoretical and practical inspirations for Thoreau’s act and essay, see Raymond Adams’ “Thoreau’s Sources for ‘Resistance to Civil Government.’”
15. For a valuable introduction to previous and current scholarship on Thoreau’s politics, see Turner. I follow Bob Taylor, who views Thoreau as a “critic whose primary concerns are the health of the democratic community we profess to value and the integrity of the citizenry upon which any decent democratic community must be built” (8). For Thoreau’s use of natural law, see Nabers.
16. Although no drafts exist to confirm, it appears that Thoreau twice delivered an early draft of “Resistance” at the Concord Lyceum in January and February 1848 (Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures before *Walden*” 153-5). Lawrence Rosenwald has suggested that in his lectures Thoreau likely linked his act of protest with that of Bronson Alcott, a connection not made in the published piece (157).
17. In *Wild Fruits*, however, the connection to abolitionism is explicit, as Thoreau explains how the huckleberry crop “grows wild all over the country—wholesome, bountiful, and free, a real ambrosia. And yet men, the foolish demons that they are, devote themselves to the culture of tobacco, inventing slavery and a thousand other curses for that purpose, with infinite pains and inhumanity go raise tobacco all their lives, and that is the staple instead of huckleberries” (51). As Lance Newman has demonstrated, *Wild Fruits* provides a materialist analysis of ecosocial alienation, revealing “the way that capitalist social and economic relations have destroyed humankind’s immediate collective relationship with nature” (*Our Common Dwelling* 175).
18. For Thoreau’s interest in Milton, see Doudna and Van Anglen.

19. "Slavery in Massachusetts" was originally delivered at an antislavery gathering in Framingham, Massachusetts, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1854. Thoreau drew upon two sections of his Journal in writing his speech. The first, from April and May 1851, contained his response to the arrest and rendition of Thomas Sims. The second, from May and June 1854, referred to Anthony Burns. Wendell Glick has noted that "the similarities in the two cases apparently made the assimilation easy" (General Introduction 229). Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, in "Editorial Savoir Faire," traces Thoreau's revisions of his 1851 and 1854 Journal entries, claiming that whereas the Journal's tone is militant, the speech is less strident. Thoreau's changes, Petrulionis argues, reflect a sensitivity toward his audience in light of the upcoming publication of *Walden* (207). Petrulionis also shows how Thoreau integrated social protest within a journal that had become nearly exclusively devoted to nature writing (210). See also Petrulionis's "Historical Introduction" to the 1854 Journal (8: 405-7) and Richardson (314-6). For a rhetorical analysis of the speech that claims that Thoreau blends the practical and the Transcendental, see Funk.

Shortly after the event in Framingham, Thoreau's speech was reprinted in the *Liberator* and the *New York Tribune*. Unlike the effectively ignored "Resistance to Civil Government," "Slavery in Massachusetts" introduced Thoreau to abolitionists throughout the Northeast (Fink 86-7).

20. In comparing "Resistance to Civil Government" and "Slavery in Massachusetts," Barbara L. Packer notes a "sense of collective loss" in the 1854 essay missing in the earlier piece (228). Michael Bennett sees Thoreau repudiating the Transcendentalist detachment of *Walden*, aligning himself with "the communal discourse of the abolitionists" (91). Similarly, Robert D. Richardson posits that Thoreau drew upon the "rhetorical style" of Garrison, Phillips, and Douglass (319).
21. Perhaps signaling how thinking about slavery as pollution was associated with Thoreau, Adam Warwick, the character in Louisa May Alcott's *Moods* that is based on Thoreau, condemns the "pestilence of slavery" that "lurks in the air and infects me." Warwick thus heads North to rehabilitate his body and soul (12).
22. Rogers, in an editorial titled "Trees," sounds equally Miltonic when he expresses his faith that "when peace and liberty prevail, we will have an Eden...from one end of the land (and the world)

to the other" (*A Collection* 153). In his reference to Satan, Thoreau joins a group of abolitionists who represented the Fugitive Slave Act's primary supporter, Daniel Webster, as Satan. See, for example, James M. Whitfield's 1852 poem "The Arch Apostate." By contrast, Thoreau's friend, Parker Pillsbury, equated Nathaniel Rogers with Christ in his 1884 *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles* (44-5). As Albert Von Frank has detailed, Anthony Burns was also figured as Christlike in the wake of his arrest (269).

23. Paul Outka makes a similar critique, arguing that Thoreau attempts to "assert the essential purity of nature" on a noumenal level. Thoreau's striving for a "pure natural realm outside of race, history, and politics," Outka explains, is an escapist fantasy which serves to naturalize privilege (48-9). Larry Reynolds, responding to this critique, suggests that Thoreau does not turn away from the world so much as turn toward an Eastern conception of reality, rising "above the illusory slime of the world" (128).
24. My argument about "Slavery in Massachusetts" here is similar to Laura Dassow Walls' claim that Thoreau articulates in "Slavery in Massachusetts" the sense that "politics has turned nature into a ruin" ("Greening" 98).
25. Outka sees "a racially marked unconscious reemerging in the binary" comprised of the white water lily and the decay of slavery (48). As has been well documented by historians of Free Soil, the belief in slavery's pollution was often motivated by anti-black racism. See, for example, Foner (*Politics and Ideology* 81). While I find Outka's argument compelling, I agree with Laura Dassow Walls, who has argued that Thoreau "offers the lily as an emblem, not of white racial purity or supremacy, but of the moral purity and courage that he insisted must yet live on in the hearts and minds of his fellow citizens." This is a Humboldtian move, Walls explains, this finding an emblem of pure nature amidst society's corruption. Thoreau suggests that race is not naturalized "and that inequality was not a natural but a social legacy. It was up to intellectual and political leaders to end injustice, leaders who could see through the dominant power politics that offered science as the rationalization for racism and the war of the strong against the weak" ("Greening" 99).
26. See, for example, Edward Everett Hale's *Kanzas and Nebraska: The History, Geographical and Physical Characteristics, and Political*

*Position of those Territories*, wherein Hale argues that only those unfamiliar with the "Missouri Debate" find the situation concerning Kansas and Nebraska to be unprecedented (166).

27. The debate concerning Missouri's admittance to the Union hinged upon issues of slavery in the territories that comprised the Louisiana Purchase, gradual emancipation, and sectional balance. Southerners vociferously protested a proposal by New York congressman John Tallmadge for gradual emancipation in Missouri in part because of their hope that the West would provide new land for cotton production and due to increased demand for slaves from the Atlantic states who felt they could no longer rely on tobacco production. The Missouri Compromise, based on a proposal from Illinois Senator Jesse Thomas, stated that Missouri would be admitted as a slave state, while its southern border at 36° 30' would serve as the northern limit for future slave states in the territories. With the Missouri Compromise, the Slave Power put in place a trajectory of expansion, an increasingly severe commitment to race-based slavery, and a political climate of entrenched sectionalism (Howe 147-8). Robert Levine has suggested that debates over Missouri led not only to increased sectionalism but also, more specifically, "raised new questions about the problematics of borders on both the state and national level" (71-2). As I have been arguing throughout, both Rogers and Thoreau sought to draw attention to shifting borders and uncertain boundaries in explicitly ecological terms.
28. Both Robert C. Albrecht and Sandra Harbert Petrulionis see this passage as a Transcendentalist moment, where Thoreau, writing just before the publication of *Walden*, uses a natural metaphor to express his faith in justice and the Higher Law (Albrecht 183-4; Petrulionis, "Editorial Savoir Faire" 218-9).
29. Len Gougeon has claimed that Thoreau's writings on Brown "mark the final and, in some ways, the most dramatic step in the evolution of Thoreau's reformist philosophy" ("Thoreau" 207). Walter Harding notes a "progression" from "Resistance to Civil Government" to "A Plea for Captain John Brown," as Thoreau "did not lose sight of his Transcendentalist principles" (418). David S. Reynolds finds three reasons for Thoreau's and Emerson's movement from their earlier ambivalence toward reform to their embrace of Brown: "the government's malfeasance in the 1850s, which prompted their disillusion and

- anger; the anarchistic individualism that they, along with other reformers of that decade, embraced; and a turnaround in cultural attitudes toward John Brown's historical prototype, Oliver Cromwell" (224).
30. As Bradley P. Dean and Ronald Wesley Hoag have detailed, Thoreau delivered "The Character and Actions of Capt. John Brown" three times in late October and early November 1859 ("Thoreau's Lectures after *Walden*" 308-24).
  31. That Thoreau celebrates this aspect of Brown's biography is unsurprising, particularly in light of what Barbara L. Packer has described as a tendency among Transcendentalists "to see their own features in Brown's character. To Thoreau, Brown is the perfect soldier, tough, self-reliant, and ascetic, who can live in swamps and learn the lore of Indians" (236).
  32. William Cronon has noted how pasturing sheep leads to "heavy wear" on fields (129). Of course, Thoreau could simply be focusing on wool as a free labor alternative to cotton.

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